THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

BENGALURU • THURSDAY • JANUARY 16, 2025 • ₹9.00 • PAGES 20 • LATE CITY EDITION

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META INDIA APOLOGISES FOR ZUCK'S REMARK THAT NDA LOST LS POLLS

Meta India on Wednesday apologised for CEO Mark Zuckerberg's incorrect claim that the NDA government lost the 2024 Lok Sabha elections

INADVERTENT ERROR, SAYS TECH FIRM'S V-P

Meta India's Vice President Shivnath Thukral took to X on Wednesday to tender an apology on behalf of the company for the "inadvertent error". "Mark's observation that many incumbent parties were not re-elected in 2024 holds true for several countries, BUT not India," Thukral said responding to Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's criticism of the remark

COMPANY AVOIDS PARLIAMENTARY SUMMONS

- BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, who heads Parliament's panel on Communications and Information Technology, said the matter is now closed. He had earlier said the panel will summon Meta India
- Zuckerberg triggered a row by claiming in a podcast that the NDA govt lost the 2024 election due to its weak Covid response | P9

1 billion

USERS FOR META APPS—WHATSAPP, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM—IN INDIA

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TRICHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

CM defers tabling of caste census report

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

CHIEF Minister **Siddaramaiah**, who was keen on taking up the Socio-Economic and Education Survey report, often referred to as the caste census, at Thursday's cabinet meeting, now seems to be not so sure. Just three days after he made the statement about tabling the report in the cabinet, he said on Wednesday that they are not tabling it now, but will take it up in subsequent cabinet meetings.

The agenda for Thursday's cabinet meeting had initially listed it as "opening of sealed cover of the study report on the data of the Social and Educational Survey - 2015 submitted by the Karnataka State Backward Classless Commission," but after the CM's statement in New Delhi, it was removed from the revised agenda.

The survey was conducted during Siddaramaiah's first tenure as CM between 2013 and 2018 when H Kantharaju was heading the Karnataka State Permanent Backward Classes Commission. It was submitted in February last year by then chairman Jayaprakash Hegde. Since then, Vokkaligas and Lingayats, including the religious heads of these prominent communities, have raised objections to the report.

Siddaramaiah, during an event in Vijayanagara district on Sunday, however, said that despite opposition, the government will table it before the cabinet as already Rs 160 crore had been spent preparing the report. "We will take necessary action in the coming days," he said in Delhi on Wednesday.

Interestingly, just hours before his statement, Karnataka Home Minister Dr G Parameshwara said the report will be taken up in the cabinet on Thursday. The government spent taxpayers' money on the survey and it is the government's duty to tell people what is in it, he said. "Accepting it or not is up to the government. We all will get to know the abstract of the report," he added.

> The government spent taxpayers' money on the survey and it is the government's duty to tell people what is in it
>
> Karnataka Home Minister Dr G Parameshwara

Deal reached to pause Gaza war, free hostages

Will kick in on Sunday, says Qatar premier; Trump takes credit for the ceasefire pact

AGENCIES

AFTER more than 15 months of grueling war, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire deal and the release of dozens of hostages, multiple officials confirmed on Wednesday.

Trump, who had warned Hamas of hell to pay if it did not free the remaining captives before he took office, said, "We have a deal for the hostages in the Middle East. They will be released shortly. Thank you!"

The deal comes after mediators Qatar, Egypt and the United States intensified their efforts in recent days to cement an agreement. Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said the deal would come into effect on Sunday.

Three officials from the US and one from Hamas confirmed that a deal had been reached, while Netanyahu's office said that final details were still unresolved, but that it hoped "details will be finalised tonight". The pact is expected to discussed by the Israeli cabinet on Thursday.

US President Joe Biden hailed the breakthrough agreement, asserting it is the result of the pressure and isolation placed on Hamas along with determined US diplomacy.

The deal is expected to deliver an initial six-week halt to fighting that is to be accompanied by the opening of negotiations on ending the war altogether. Egypt is exploring the possibility of opening the Rafah crossing to sent aid.

The deal promises the release of dozens of hostages held by Hamas in phases in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. It would also allow hundreds of thousands of people displaced in Gaza to return to what remains of their homes.

> We have a deal for the hostages in the Middle East. They will be released shortly. Thank you
>
> Donald Trump

Soon after the news broke, thousands of Gazans gathered in groups, hugging and taking photos with their mobile phones to mark the announcement in central Gaza's Deir el-Balah and other area. Earlier, over 100 hostages were freed from Gaza in 2023.

Trump said his Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, would continue "to work closely with Israel and our Allies to make sure Gaza NEVER again becomes a terrorist safe haven".

Hamas triggered the war with its October 7, 2023, attack, which killed some 1,200 Israelis. Israel responded with a fierce offensive that has killed 46,000 Palestinians. P12

Exports down for the second month in a row in Dec '24

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

INDIA's merchandise exports contracted 1% year-on-year even as imports rose 4.9% in December 2024, government data released on Wednesday showed. The trade deficit narrowed to $21.94 in December month-on-month compared to $32 billion in November as gold imports halved to $4.7 billion. In November 2024, gold imports had surged 186% year-on-year to $9.9 billion. In December 2023, the merchandise trade deficit was $18.76 billion.

Services exports during the month rose by 3.25% year-on-year, while imports grew 12%. Total trade deficit (merchandise plus services) widened to $6.78 billion in December 2024 compared to $2.76 billion in the year-ago period.

Merchandise exports during April-December 2024 were $321.71 billion compared to $316.65 billion during April-December 2023. Merchandise imports during the period were $532.48 billion compared to $506.39 billion a year ago. Merchandise trade deficit during the nine-month period of the current financial year widened to $210.77 billion from $189.74 billion a year ago.

Total exports during April-December 2024 is estimated at $602.64 billion, registering 6.03% growth.

According to Deepali Agrawal, deputy MD of India Exim Bank, the trade data highlights India's sustained growth momentum in non-oil, non-gems and jewellery exports, aided by robust contribution from labour, tech-intensive manufacturing sectors.

KARWAR RUCKUS

No fisherman assaulted, sailor was abducted, freed, says Navy

SUBHASH CHANDRA N S @ Karwar

THE Indian Navy has rubbished media reports of its sailors assaulting fishermen who were allegedly agitating against two Navy personnel, whose vehicle collided with a fisherman's scooter. It alleged that a sailor was abducted in a four-wheeler, and rescued by his fellow colleagues who gave chase. Now, Uttara Kannada district police is planning to write to naval higher-ups regarding the incident, involving fishermen and staff of INS Kadamba.

The accident at Mudga, near Karwar, on Sunday involved two Naval staff on a bike who rammed Srinivas (50) on his scooter. Both parties sustained minor injuries. The sailors helped the injured fisherman, but things took a turn for the worse and the matter reached Karwar Rural Police.

The sailors lodged a complaint, saying a group of civilians had gathered and there was a scuffle. "The sailors ensured the injured civilian received timely medical treatment. They escorted him to Pikle's Nursing Home in Karwar.. But shortly after the accident, 4-5 civilians gathered and despite the sailors' efforts to de-escalate the situation, a minor scuffle ensued," read the complaint, a copy of which is available with *TNIE*.

"We left the scene, but the civilians pursued us and demanded an additional Rs 50,000 in compensation. My friend was then coerced into a four-wheeler and taken towards Amdalli. He managed to share his live location with friends, who intercepted the vehicle and rescued him," said Yogesh Kumar, the complainant. P5

Sonia Gandhi inaugurates the new All India Congress Committee HQ at 9A, Kotla Road, in New Delhi on Wednesday | PTI

Rahul's claim of fighting Indian state draws BJP ire

PARVEZ SULTAN AND RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

A rather sharp attack by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday against RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent remarks, drew heavy retaliatory fire from BJP's biggies. At the inaugural event of the party's headquarters here, Rahul criticised Bhagwat's claim that India achieved "true independence" only after the Ram temple consecration, saying it amounts to treason.

"Bhagwat has the audacity to say to the country what he thinks about the independence movement and the Constitution. What he said yesterday is treason... Because he is stating that the Constitution is invalid and the fight against the British was invalid... In any other country, he would have been arrested and tried," Rahul claimed.

Rahul went on to say that the BJP and RSS have captured almost every institution in our country, adding the Congress is now fighting not just both of them but the Indian state itself.

In its pushback, the BJP launched a bazooka against Rahul for claiming the Congress was fighting the Indian state. Party president J P Nadda, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, IT cell head Amit Malviya and others castigated Rahul for his 'objectionable' remark, adding it exposed his mindset against India.

> The BJP and RSS have captured every single institution in this country and we are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian state itself
>
> Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader

> Congress has a history of encouraging all those forces who want a weak India. Their greed for power meant compromising the nation's integrity
>
> J P Nadda, BJP president

"I compliment Mr Rahul Gandhi for saying clearly what nation knows that he is fighting the Indian state. It is not a secret that Mr Gandhi and his ecosystem have close links with Urban Naxal and the deep state who want to defame, demean and discredit India," Nadda alleged.

Sitharaman wondered why Rahul carried a copy of the Constitution when he was using such language.

Malviya said, "Rahul Gandhi has now declared an open war against the Indian State itself. This is straight out of George Soros's playbook".

The Congress got its new headquarters 47 years after the party made bungalow No. 24, Akbar Road its temporary head office. Parliamentary Party chief Sonia Gandhi inaugurated the swanky office. Party president Mallikarjun Kharge said Indira Bhawan, the new HQ, had been built on the foundation of democracy, nationalism, secularism, inclusive development and social justice.

Protesting relatives and friends of people killed and abducted by Hamas and taken into Gaza, relieved after news broke on the truce deal, in Tel Aviv, on Wednesday | AP

EXPRESS READ

MUDA: Lokayukta will continue probe, says HC

Bengaluru: The Karnataka High Court on Wednesday allowed the Lokayukta police to continue its investigation into the alleged irregularities in the allotment of sites to CM Siddaramaiah's wife BM Parvathy by the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) | P4

POCSO: Foolproof case against BSY, SPP tells HC

Bengaluru: There is a foolproof case against senior BJP leader and former CM Yediyurappa in the POCSO case and the recorded conversation between him and the victim references what happened between them, argued SPP before the Karnataka High Court on Wednesday | P4

BCom, CA test timing clash, B'luru City varsity defers exams indefinitely

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

IN a chaotic turn of events, Bengaluru City University (BCU) first postponed its undergraduate first-semester examination from 9.30am to 2pm on January 16, only to announce another last-minute postponement without specifying a new date.

The abrupt changes left thousands of students, especially those appearing for the Chartered Accountancy (CA) foundation exams, grappling with stress and confusion.

The university issued its first notification at 4.30pm Wednesday, informing students and principals about the timing change. This created a direct clash with the CA foundation exam, also scheduled for 2pm on January 16.

Later in the evening, Bengaluru City University issued another announcement, postponing the exams indefinitely, without providing a new date, citing "unavoidable reasons".

In this regard, a BCom student who is concurrently preparing for the CA exams, had approached former education minister S Suresh Kumar, after receiving the unexpected notification from the university on Wednesday, just hours before the exam. It informed her of the schedule change without providing any explanation, and only cited 'unavoidable reasons'.

Suresh Kumar then contacted Higher Education Minister Dr MC Sudhakar and requested him to look into the matter.

Students had previously too raised concerns about overlapping exam schedules between the BCU and CA exams. Despite the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) releasing its exam timetable in September, Bengaluru City University published its own schedule on December 13, which clashed with the CA exams.

Sue mastermind of Pannun plot, says top panel

MUKESH RANJAN @ New Delhi

A high-powered committee set up by the government in the wake of a botched operation to bump off Khalistani radical Gurupatwant Singh Pannun on US soil, recommended legal action against 'an individual' who masterminded the plot.

While the report did not name the individual, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified him as Vikash Yadav.

In its lookout notice, the FBI said Yadav was wanted in a "murder-for-hire case; conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire; and money laundering". The US District Court, Southern District of New York, issued an arrest warrant against him on October 10, 2024.

The home ministry said in a statement that the panel was formed in 2023 to probe the individual's links with the drug mafia and criminal gangs after allegations that a plot was hatched to disturb American security interest in 2023.

"After a long enquiry, the Committee has recommended legal action against an individual, whose earlier criminal links and antecedents also came to notice during the enquiry," the ministry said.

Yadav was with the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) when the alleged plot to bump off Pannun went sideways. He was later sacked.

The ministry said the panel recommended expeditious legal action against him.

While announcing the constitution of the high-powered committee in November 2023, the External Affairs Ministry had said it will look into all relevant aspects of the matter.

"The Enquiry Committee conducted its own investigations and also pursued leads provided by the US side. It received full cooperation from US authorities and the two sides also exchanged visits. The Committee further examined a number of officials from different agencies and also scrutinised relevant documents in this connection." It added that the panel recommended "functional improvements in systems and procedures as also initiation of steps that could strengthen India's response capability, ensure systematic controls and coordinated action in dealing with matters like this".

Yadav is accused of recruiting Nikhil Gupta in May 2023 to hire the killer, who turned out to be an undercover US agent. Gupta was arrested in Prague and was subsequently extradited to the US.

In December 2023, Yadav was arrested by Delhi Police in a case of kidnapping and extortion lodged against him. He is currently on bail in this case.

The home ministry's statement comes days before president-elect Donald Trump takes the oath of office in the US.

> Yadav and his co-conspirator arranged for an associate to deliver $15,000 in cash in New York as an advance payment for the murder —FBI's wanted person notice